



SAMPLE CHAPTER...Lesson 7

Healing from Past Hurts

For many of us, the previous lessons are all we need to understand how we are contributing to the problem of excessive stress in our lives. However, there are some of us who will need to take a further step. We may have lingering negative feelings from a broken relationship or a failed marriage. These feelings cause us to act unnaturally and affect our current relationships and circumstances. From time to time, we may have been distressed by the way we behave, yet we have been unable to change. Certain relationships and circumstances trigger a childish and harmful reaction in us rather than a thoughtful, adult response. The more we try to change, the more stressful we become over our poor performance.

It is possible we are still bound by events in our past. We need to identify what these are and offer them to Christ for healing. Some of the clearest indications of our need for healing are *repeated* incidents of one or more of the following:

Feel low self-worth

Have easily hurt feelings

Are fearful of rejection

Please others to receive approval

Find reasons to blame others

Intimidate (or intimidated) by anger and personal criticism

React rather than act

Confuse love with excitement or the need to fix or help

Cannot break off a love/hate relationship

Experience repeated hurtful incidents

Suffer from feelings of rejection and/or shame

Over-react to change over which you have no control

Have difficulty controlling anger

Suffer from depression

Feel guilty whenever you stand up for yourself

Experience lingering guilt over certain events

Caretaker or 'mother' others

Take on the reality (values and responsibilities) of others

Need to control -- power seeking

Isolate romantic relationships and/or special friendships

Desire instant gratification -- manipulate or intimidate to get it

Are addicted to excitement

Deny feelings or can't express feelings

Are critical, judgmental, gossipy

Have chronic anxiety about the future

Have repeated broken relationships

Lie or exaggerate when it would be just as easy to tell the truth

Experience repeated failure with projects or employment

Suffer from lingering guilt about the past

Are frustrated by your perfectionism

Procrastinate until pressured

Feel different from other people

Respond in extremes: all your fault or all my fault, for me or against me

Engage in compulsive/addictive behavior or have married a compulsive/addictive person

We will not have all of these character traits. It will depend upon the events of our past and how we have learned to adjust.

When guilt, anger, shame or fear lie unresolved within us it affects our maturing process. Most of us learn to repress what is wrong and we begin to relate to people in harmful ways. Every event of our past has been recorded in our minds and will continue to affect our present and our future. For example, if feelings of guilt or shame are not resolved through receiving forgiveness, we are likely to involve ourselves in circumstances or relationships that will punish us. We may not be aware we are doing this until we see a repeated pattern of hurtful events in our lives that we suspect could have been avoided. We have unconsciously involved ourselves because we believe we deserve punishment.

In addition to considering our past hurtful relationships, we may need to consider if we were traumatized as a child from some hurtful event (such as being emotionally or physically abused or abandoned, our parents divorcing, a significant illness or premature death in the family). We may feel that our childhood was normal and healthy. However, if we see repeated signs of trouble in our lives (or in our children's lives), we need to consider that we may have unresolved negative feelings. At first, it may be difficult for us to accept that we have been traumatized, and the degree of our trauma and resulting dysfunction may be slight, but it is still worth considering.

Unresolved Negative Feelings Produce Imbalance

When we have unresolved negative feelings, we behave in unnatural and self-defeating ways. We may be trying too hard to receive the affirmation we missed in childhood. Or we may have become co-dependent, depending upon people and circumstances to provide us with happiness because we cannot find it within ourselves. At the end of this lesson is a summary of how our lives go out of balance because of unresolved negative feelings (see “Unresolved Hurts Cause Our Lives to Lack Balance,” page 89).

Imbalance in our Relationships

We will use either a passive or an aggressive approach to try to control our relationships. We may use a mild form of these approaches or we may be polarized at either of these two extremes.

If we choose a passive approach, we generally are fearful of what other people think or say about us and we allow their opinions to form the basis of our self-worth. We make every effort to have people tell us we are okay. We are others-centered, focusing on their needs in an unduly selfless way and neglecting our own needs. When we are criticized, we will often assume we are guilty before we rationally think through the criticism. We struggle with feelings of inferiority and we usually try to manipulate for control by appearing weak (helpless, martyred, emotional or victimized). We may also use a pleasant but delaying or forgetful approach to our relationships to avoid decisions or necessary actions.

We tend to trust others more than we trust ourselves. We try too hard to please and we allow ourselves to be abused because we cannot act appropriately in ways to defend ourselves. We adopt the lifestyles of others, becoming what others want us to become. We live with what is meaningful to them and have little meaning in our own lives.

If we choose an aggressive approach to try to control our relationships, we will manipulate others through intimidation or anger. We are often critical and tend to cling to the negative judgments we make, despite the harm it does. We are more interested in ourselves than in others and we trust ourselves more than we trust others. It is important for us to appear strong and we identify showing emotions with weakness. It is difficult for us to get in touch with and express our feelings. We are insensitive about others when we are focused on how things and people are making us feel.

Some of us use the passive stance to try to control, while others of us use the aggressive stance. The approach we take is usually one we have learned from a parent. Many of us will use both ways (one parent may have taught us how to be passive and the other may have taught us how to be aggressive). In some relationships, we allow ourselves to be abused, but, in other relationships, we use others to get our way. For example, we may act passively toward our spouse and aggressively toward our friends or children. Then there are some of us who will take a passive role for a period of time and then adopt the contrasting behavior.

We may not exhibit all of the behaviors described but, the more polarized we are in either the passive or aggressive extreme, the more healing is needed. The ideal is not to swing from one side of the pendulum to the other, but be able to respond more closely to a balanced center --acting in a gentle or assertive way, depending upon the circumstance.

If we have unresolved hurts, we will seek relationships similar to those that existed in our youth so that we have another opportunity to resolve old issues. Some of us date or marry a person who is like the family member or authority figure (such as teacher, coach or guardian) who abandoned or abused us. We are unconsciously guided by the thought, "This time I will make it work. This time I will be loved." If we fail again, we will find another person with whom we can work out our unresolved issues. Their personalities may differ, even their problems may be different (a first marriage may fail because of alcoholism, the second because of workaholism or uncontrolled anger), but the result is the same -- more abuse or abandonment. There is a saying that often hits the mark: "We become like one parent and marry the other."

If we have had a series of harmful relationships, we need to see if there is a common factor which would indicate the root of a problem. Some of us may recognize a common factor in relationships with the opposite sex. Others of us may have more difficulty with people of the same sex. The people we are drawn to may be critical or emotionally distant. Or they may be unfaithful to us and reject or abuse us. If these things existed in a relationship years ago (or in the recent past) and it remains unresolved in us, we will be drawn into similar harmful relationships again and again until we are healed of the original hurt.

There is another possible factor to consider: we may be seeking in others the qualities we are unable to express ourselves. For example, if we are emotional and volatile because of childhood problems, we may seek someone who represents calmness and stability to us. However, we may eventually resent that person for being what we cannot be, or we may feel uncomfortable because they are so unlike ourselves. The best solution is not to seek balance by finding in another person what is lacking in us, but by developing it in ourselves.

A final common factor in our harmful relationships may stem from a declaration spoken to us in childhood or in a previous harmful relationship. We may need to ask the Lord, "Am I trying to fulfill a prophecy?" Someone may have made a judgment about us, either spoken or implied and it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, we may have heard, "You will never amount to anything!" or, "You can't do anything right!" "You will always be fat!" or, "You are so stupid!" There is tremendous power in the words spoken to us. We will work hard to fulfill others' expectations, or to bring about what we think we deserve.

Imbalance in our Circumstances

Unresolved negative feelings cause us to react unnaturally when we think our circumstances are threatening our security and happiness. We feel a loss of control and respond in unbalanced and self-defeating ways. We may find an activity or substance to try to regain feelings of control or to avoid what is bothering us. Compulsions and addictions rise out of our dependence upon these mood-altering activities or substances. We increasingly rely on them to numb our pain. We can identify compulsions or addictions by the excessive amount of time, energy or money we devote to them, and by their life-damaging consequences in our relationships, employment, health or self-esteem.

Most of us who have been hurt have learned to look outside of ourselves for happiness and meaning because we cannot find it within. We count on status, pleasure, work, food or drugs to take away our negative feelings and absence of meaning. When our pursuit does not fulfill us, we think that having more of the activity or substance will solve the problem.

We can ask the Lord, "What circumstances trigger in me a desire to do something excessively? Am I still troubled with feelings of inferiority, fear, guilt or anger?" We can ask the Lord to give us a check in our spirits -- a sense of caution or warning when we are falling into excessive behavior. The Anonymous groups have an acronym. We must be especially careful about being compulsive when we are hungry, angry, lonely or tired, in other words -- HALT! We can also ask the Lord to bring healthy people into our lives so we can learn to interact in better ways.

We are to look to our past not to blame others, but to bring the healing love of Jesus Christ and be set free from the bondage of our negative feelings.^{1[1]} If we refuse to look at our past hurts, we are destined to experience further problems. We will also influence our children. We will be preoccupied with getting our needs met. They learn our self-defeating behavior and model it to their children.

^{1[1]} For a full examination of this subject, refer to The New Life Series book, "*Healing and Hope*".

In many passages in the Old Testament, God is speaking to the nation of Israel or to individuals of old. However, His words are rich in meaning for us today.

1. What does Solomon tell us about the past affecting our present and future?

Ecclesiastes

3:15

The Revised Standard Version of Ecclesiastes 3:15 reads, "and God seeks what has been driven away." We drive away our painful memories because we don't want them to disturb us. We choose to ignore signals that could direct us to a past hurt -- that could help us expose the root of a problem. We do not believe trusted friends or family when they warn us of something harmful we are doing. Or we respond with anger and blame.

2. What did Jeremiah prophesy that God will do for His people?

Jeremiah 30:17

Question for private reflection:

Is there a relationship in your life where you are behaving in a way that is harmful to you or to your friend (consider your past relationships as well)?

Question for private reflection:

Is there any way in which you are acting compulsively and your behavior is disturbing your peace or balance in your life?

We have a responsibility to address our past, not only for our good, but for the good of others. When we receive healing, we can then help our friends and family. How do we begin?

We are to Seek Understanding of Ourselves

We begin by learning about our self-defeating behavior -- what threatens us and why, why our responses are harmful and how our lives lack balance. God is the most reliable source for understanding ourselves. He is ultimate truth and knows all about us. He wants us to be healed even more than we do and is waiting to help us.

- 3.** How did David pray to gain understanding?

Psalm 139:23-24 _____

4. How does God promise to help us?

Isaiah 41:10 _____

How are we to respond?

Psalms 85:8 _____

We can acquire a great deal of understanding and support from professional counselors, clergy, books and recovery groups, such as Alanon or Adult Children of Alcoholics (for family members of alcoholics), and the Anonymous groups (for alcoholics, co-dependents, abusive spouses and parents, incest survivors, addicted gamblers, overeaters, smokers, drug users, etc.) These groups give us valuable information about ourselves as well as guidance and encouragement to learn new and healthier ways of living. We can also be helped by books on co-dependency, assertiveness, communication skills and resolving conflicts.

As we seek understanding, we need to be certain we are not just addressing symptoms and overlooking the root of our problem. Our lives will change for the better only when we pray for understanding and healing of the root.

We can listen to God about our past. In times of prayerful meditation, we can remember our relationships with our family members when we were children. Do we have any lingering feelings of resentment, guilt, fear, or unworthiness? We can ask God to bring to our minds any hurts that are unresolved. He will show us what trauma is still affecting our lives and holding us in bondage. God rarely speaks to us with an audible voice, but He will guide us in remembering and we will receive definite impressions in our minds.

Our prayers concerning our past are best done as a process -- praying only about one incident at a time. It is also preferable to allow a period of time (several days) to pass before we pray about additional experiences. We do not want to rush this process. We do not have to be afraid of a memory that the Lord will reveal because He will only bring to our recollection something we can handle and He is ready to heal.

It is best if we have someone pray with us or have someone with whom we can share what we are learning (a pastor or priest, a mature Christian friend or counselor). If any memory is puzzling, he or she can help us to understand what we are learning and can pray with us for healing. It will be important to ask God to lead us to someone who will understand and encourage us.

God will guide us through the healing process -- encouraging us to pray and leading us to people, groups or books that will help us. It is not necessary to recall every detail of our past hurts. Instead, we can try to feel the emotions connected with them and surrender them to God. If you cannot recall your feelings at the time you were hurt, try to imagine how you would have felt under those circumstances.

The following is a suggested prayer you might use to begin your dialogue with God about the healing of your past.

Heavenly Father, I see some things in my life that I am unhappy with, yet I have not been able to change. I offer to you my past and ask for your protection as I surrender my memories to you. Guide me into remembering those incidents that you want to heal. (Wait for inspiration regarding a memory).

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are with me in that incident now, loving me and shielding me. Grant me your wisdom concerning this memory so that I may have a mature understanding toward the person(s) involved. Heal me of any hurt I suffered, remembered or not remembered and any negative feelings that are lingering.

Thank you for your transforming presence in my memory and for freeing me from the bondage of my hurt. Help me to receive your healing love, Lord Jesus, as I pray in your name. Amen.

We will continue to remember our past hurts, but they will lose their power to hurt us or hold us in bondage. There are further steps we are to take.

B. We Are to Forgive Others

Jesus wants us to remember something important as we pray about our past hurts:

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Mark 11:25

5. How does the Lord instruct us regarding forgiveness?

Matthew 6:14-15 _____

Personal Application _____

It may seem from this verse that God withholds His forgiveness when we do not forgive others. However, God's forgiveness is always there waiting to be bestowed. It is we who block His forgiveness by our refusal to forgive another. Instead of being honest and contrite about our judgment of others, we are taking the position that what another has done to us is more important than our own need of forgiveness. Our hardness of heart, our presumption to judge as if we were God, makes us unable to receive His forgiveness.

We are cleansed of our negative feelings and we can receive the healing blessings of Christ when we do the work of forgiveness connected with past hurtful events. Forgiveness is not always easy because it seems natural not to forgive. We think we have every right to be angry. We want to feel we are right and another is wrong. We think it places us in a superior or more secure position. We may also want to retain the right to complain.

- 6.** How does Paul ask us to approach our hurtful relationships?

Ephesians 4:31-32 _____

Questions for private reflection:

Is there anyone in your life whom you have not forgiven for hurting you? What can you resolve to do?

If we have been severely hurt by someone, we may think we cannot forgive. We should not wait for the desire to forgive. It is first a decision we make. Then we can ask God for compassion and understanding and His help to forgive. The desire to forgive will eventually follow this decision of our wills.

Forgiveness is a process. Our willingness and ability to forgive does not usually come all at once, but step by step. We may even think we have forgiven only to realize, when an incident flashes into our minds, that the hurt and anger are still there. We can keep asking the Lord to enable us to forgive until we have completed the process.

It is common for many of us to be stuck in one of the following stages that keep us from healing: anger, depression or denial. *It is significant that the work of forgiving ourselves and others (including God) is what finally releases us so the healing process can proceed.*

The following is a suggested prayer for receiving help in our work of forgiveness. You may wish to prayerfully fill in the blanks before you begin.

Heavenly Father, I thank you that I am learning from the Scriptures to be freed from any bondage to my past. Show me the people toward whom I still have feelings of unforgiveness. (Wait upon God to receive His inspiration.) Help me to be willing to forgive them.

In obedience to the teaching of Jesus, I now forgive

_____ for hurting me. Help me to understand and have compassion toward them so I may be at peace and can pray that you will bless them.

Thank you for the ability to forgive that you grant to all those who ask. I believe you are going to help me until I have feelings of goodwill toward everyone in my past. Through Jesus Christ our Lord I pray. Amen.

You may need to refer often to this prayer as you work through the hurtful events of your past.

Part of our work of forgiveness includes the need to repent of the judgments we have made.^{2[2]} When we presume to judge, the Scriptures warn that judgment will return to us.^{3[3]} By holding on to our negative judgments, we are not able to complete our forgiveness and we suffer the consequences. We become bound in patterns of negative thinking, justification of our behavior, denial of our responsibility, stubbornness and pride. We do not mature and our relationships are harmed. We bring judgment upon ourselves.

^{2[2]} Refer to Lesson 4, page 44 for a definition of judgment.

^{3[3]} Matthew 7:1-2

We sometimes judge others because we are unwilling to deal with the same weakness existing in ourselves. It is also true that the people we judge when we are adults are often those who display similar behavior to those who have hurt us in the past.

The following is a suggested prayer for repenting of the judgments we have made.

Heavenly Father, show me where I am still judging people from my past. Help me to sincerely grieve and repent of any judgments I have been making. (Wait upon God to receive His inspiration.)

Show me if there is any attitude or behavior that I have been criticizing in others that is similar to what I am doing. (Wait upon God to receive His inspiration.)

I repent of this thinking and behavior, Lord, and I ask for your forgiveness. Help me to change. I praise you that my repentance leads to your forgiveness, cleansing and joy. I pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We need to continue praying for the healing of our hurtful memories and for God's help to complete our forgiveness and repentance. We do this until we feel there is nothing more God wants us to address regarding our past.

Jesus came to live among us to share our weaknesses and to tell us of the Father's love. He is waiting to forgive, to restore and to heal us so we will live a creative and fulfilling life.

Personal Reflections

It is especially important for single people to consider whether or not they are being influenced by any unresolved trauma in their past. We need to be healthy in order to choose healthy relationships in the future.

Some singles think that all they need to do is to be married and they will be happy. They spend a lot of time wishing their lives were different. They are waiting for someone or something to complete the picture. Being married means that we exchange one set of challenges for another. Whatever ability we have to enjoy personal fulfillment as a single person, we will have that same ability as a married person. We take who we are into our relationships, including our weaknesses. These do not disappear. With the initial romantic attachment, it may seem that all is well, but our old problems will resurface. God does not want us to continue making the same mistakes over and over again.

It is also true that singles who lack self-esteem place more importance on what their dates are thinking instead of what they themselves are thinking. Instead of asking themselves, "Do I think he/she is nice?", we think, "Will he/she like me?" We try to please and will even compromise ourselves until we receive the affirmation we are craving. Our personal fulfillment should not depend upon whether or not we are dating someone special. In fellowship with Jesus Christ, we can find the kind of creative, challenging and rewarding life we are intended to enjoy.

Some years ago while I was working on a church staff, I had some difficulty relating to one of the pastors. Each time I thought he was being critical of me, I would become hurt and teary. This happened over and over again until I finally acknowledged that God was trying to show me I needed to change. I went to a Christian friend and asked her if she would pray with me, to ask God if I needed inner healing. While we were praying, something began to emerge in my mind -- something I had not thought of before. I needed to forgive my father for dying. I was fifteen years old when he died and this hurt was still affecting my relationships. I must have received his death as a kind of rejection and, since then, each time I was faced with criticism from a man I respected, the fear of rejection was so great I would fall apart. This was my first lesson regarding the important connection between the past and the present and the need for forgiveness and healing. As I forgave my father for dying, and forgave God for allowing it to happen, I began to be released from my fear of rejection. In the process of this healing, I also felt God was showing me that I was depending on the approval of certain people for my feelings of worth.

It was painful for me at first to admit that I needed inner healing -- from the hurts of my childhood as well as from my marriage (the trauma of my husband's alcoholism and sudden death). In my marriage, I had allowed my husband's reality (his hopes and needs) to replace my own. I also assumed more and more of his responsibilities and tried to avoid confrontation by pleasing him far more than was healthy.

After my husband died, I decided to bury the hurts that had occurred in the final years of his alcoholism. It was the Scriptures concerning forgiveness that kept nagging at my conscience until I knew I needed to address those past hurts and forgive. When the forgiveness of my husband was complete, I realized that I needed to forgive the hurts I had received from members of my family, as well as a pastor and two schoolteachers. In praying for the ability to forgive, I learned that forgiveness is a process, and I needed to repent of the judgments I had made in order for my forgiveness to be complete.

Judgments that I made as a child may have been made out of ignorance but, if I have retained them, I am responsible for those judgments as an adult. We may not have understood why people hurt or rejected, but this must not keep us from applying our mature understanding and compassion toward them now. Judgments harbored, especially within families, lock people into unnatural relationships. The effects can be passed down from generation to generation.

The longer we hold onto our judgments, the more fixated we become in our behavior and narrower in our personalities. We think so much about our hurt, anger, resentment or retaliation, that the people toward whom we are directing our thoughts control us. We give the person we cannot forgive power over us because we are in bondage to our negative thinking. We may even begin to assume the behavior traits we are judging because we are so bound to them. Unforgiveness is like a cancer. It spreads and grows, harming us far more than the person we are judging.

Sometimes I have forgiven others and accepted God's forgiveness, but I have found it difficult to forgive myself. I have had to say to myself, "I accept God's forgiveness and love, and now I forgive myself." I do this until I feel released from my guilt.

Jesus wants to be Lord of our past as well as our present and our future. He forgives and heals us because He loves us and wants us to know the love of God. We can truly forgive and love others when we have first received God's forgiveness and love and we have a proper love for ourselves. This new way of seeing ourselves and others enables us to have healthy and satisfying relationships and considerably reduces the stress in our lives.

Unresolved Hurts Cause Our Lives to Lack Balance

We are either:

Exhibiting passive/or aggressive behavior when threatened

Acting out of feelings of inferiority/or feelings of grandiosity

Unable to confront/or confront with intimidation or anger

Overly sensitive to others/or insensitive to others

Used by people/or user of people

Hyper-sensitive to events/or in denial about events

Tolerating inappropriate behavior/or highly intolerant

Too trusting/or unable to trust

Overly serious/or don't take life seriously enough

Overworked with many projects going at one time/or can't get a project going

Compulsive about finishing projects/or having difficulty finishing projects

Perfectionistic/or sloppy

Extremely loyal to a fault/or promiscuous

Unmercifully judgmental toward others/or don't care about others

Super-responsible/or super-irresponsible

Over-gregarious and can't be alone/or isolated

Unable to make decisions/or impulsive about decisions

You will see in the first eight categories that people who are passive and trying to please are described in the left part of the sentences and aggressive people are described in the right part of the sentences. It may appear that aggressive people are more at fault. However, both areas reflect harmful and controlling behavior. We are attempting to manipulate our relationships and circumstances to find security and happiness. The last nine categories are imbalances that can occur whether we are passive or aggressive.

Singles who have experienced hurtful relationships are also vulnerable to becoming involved in a love/hate relationship and are unable to extricate themselves. They may have become addicted to the person who is harming them. They play a never-ending cat and mouse game. One partner is the pursuer, then becomes disillusioned and backs off. The fear of rejection or loss is triggered in the other partner and he/she becomes the pursuer, charming and winning their partner back. This “tango” is repeated, over and over. Though increasingly destructive, neither partner can break away until healing is received.

Aggressive people will often find passive people with whom to form relationships, because their controlling behavior will be accepted by passive, people-pleasing persons. Passive people, on the other hand, are often attracted to aggressive people because they exhibit the strong behavior they themselves are lacking. We are often drawn to people who are able to do things we find difficult or who are able to express thoughts and feelings we are unable to express. As we experience healing, we will be more able to act appropriately and express thoughts and feelings we have long denied.

An aggressive person needs to be careful forming a relationship with another aggressive person--they may sometimes interact violently. Similarly, a passive person needs to be careful when forming a relationship with a similar personality. With both of them unable to confront and repressing their hurts, issues will remain unresolved until it is difficult to rescue the relationship.

Sometimes we will form new relationships (especially in courtship), by disguising our passive or aggressive behavior. We appear to be what the other person wants. Many couples have a rude awakening after marriage when the ‘real’ persons emerge. However, when both people want a relationship to work, and they are willing to seek counsel and healing, they can learn to find balance in their personalities and wholeness in their relationships.